

St. Thomas and Skepticism



John 20:24 "But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'"

Michael Shermer is an American science writer, a historian of science, the executive director of *The Skeptics Society*, and the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, a publication focused on investigating pseudoscientific and supernatural claims. Midway into his ambitious, most recent learned volume, Shermer relates this intriguing personal story: In 2014, his fiancée (now wife) had moved to California from Germany, bringing with her a Philips

transistor radio, a gift from her late and beloved grandfather, Walter. Walter had been a surrogate father to her, and she had fond memories of listening to music with him growing up on that radio, but the radio wasn't working anymore. She and Shermer switched out the batteries, tried various stations, and otherwise fiddled with the machine, but in frustration ended up tossing it into a desk drawer in the bedroom.

Months later, following a small wedding ceremony at their home, Shermer's wife was feeling melancholic and disconnected from her family. The newlyweds took a quiet moment together, away from the group, and at that precise moment music started wafting from the bedroom. They followed the sound, which was a love song, and traced it to the desk drawer, indeed they traced it to that "broken" radio discarded months before. It was, Shermer noted, a "spine-tingling experience."

And it gets better. The radio could have been tuned to any station, or to no station at all, but it was playing just the kind of emotionally comforting music the couple needed at that moment. The radio continued to broadcast similar music all evening, and then went silent again. And it has remained silent ever since, despite Shermer's efforts to revive it.

What are we to make of Shermer's "spine-tingling experience?" What does Shermer himself make of it, as he is a trained scientist and, more importantly, a devoted skeptic who has built a career

debunking any and all claims of the paranormal or supernatural. Yet, by his own account he has difficulty dismissing this extraordinary experience. The physics of the radio suddenly playing might be easily explained he imagined – with a change in humidity, a speck of dust, whatever – but the timing and emotional significance of the experience are unexplained and uncanny, and indeed impossible to rationalize with the scientific insights available to us now, thus Shermer admitted to the limits of our scientific knowledge to explain this event.

Shermer devotes considerable space to this personal story because it encapsulates the human condition. Ever since the earliest humans became aware of their mortality, they – we – have been striving to make sense of the big chill and what comes after. Death is undeniable, yet unknowable, he thinks, despite regular reports of 'near death' experiences or now 'after death experiences' as I talked about on Easter. Death, Shermer argues is a mystery that eludes our intellect, so he thinks we must come up with ways to make it all meaningful, something more than mere nothingness. This dilemma leads inevitably to explanations – beliefs – that include immortality, the soul, resurrection, and, most important here for his latest book, heaven.

By any other name, Shermer writes, heaven is "the empyrean residence of gods and other immortal essences – angels, demons, ghosts, souls – that have, to append a few common idioms,

transcended, crossed over, passed through, passed away, given up the ghost, or gone the way of all flesh from the here and now into the hereafter." The belief that death is not final is overwhelmingly popular: Since the 1990s, the Gallup polling organization has consistently found that about 3 in 4 Americans believe in heaven of some kind. A survey of people in 23 countries found that more than half of respondents believe in an afterlife. So pervasive is this conviction that even a third of self-proclaimed agnostics and atheists proclaim belief in an afterlife.

Shermer acknowledges that some believers draw solace and sustenance from their belief in heaven and that they require no proof. But as a professional skeptic, he thinks it's important to put these powerful and pervasive ideas to the test, with the same rigor that one would use with ESP or alien abduction.

Approximately 100 billion humans have come and gone since the beginning of time, he notes, and not a single one has returned to confirm the existence of an afterlife, "at least not to the high evidentiary standards of science," he writes. Schermer fails to acknowledge that from time immemorial, there have been stories, now and then, of a person who apparently died, saw an unseen world, and came back to talk about it. As I mentioned on Easter, Carol Zaleski wrote a valuable book entitled *Otherworld Journeys* (Oxford University Press, 1987), collecting such stories from many different cultures and over many different centuries.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is perhaps a more declarative account of life after death, if we can believe it, and interestingly the disciples didn't believe it either as the story unfolded. St. Thomas has forever been labeled 'the Doubter' because he did not believe the other disciples when they told him of their encounter with the Resurrected Jesus. Yet actually, this isn't a very fair attribute for St. Thomas at all. For he was not alone in his doubt and disbelief. In fact, if one looks carefully at the other recorded accounts of the Resurrection in the Bible, Thomas was in fact no more a doubter than the other disciples were. Indeed, in every other story of the Resurrection appearances that we have, the initial response of the disciples was to doubt and disbelief.

For example, in the familiar story of the women going to the Tomb on Easter Sunday morning, when the women who encountered an angel in the tomb announcing the Resurrection ran back and reported this to the Apostles, the women's words, according to Luke's Gospel, "seemed (to the Apostles) to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Lk. 24.9, 11).

When Mary Magdalene also went back to the other disciples as "they mourned and wept," and told them that she too had seen the Lord, according to Mark's Gospel (Mk. 16.9-11), "when (the disciples) heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it."

Then later that very day, two of the disciples were on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24.13-35), which is next week's Gospel story. And at dinner that night as a stranger broke bread with them, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him as the resurrected Jesus. The two disciples were so excited by this that they immediately rushed all the way back to Jerusalem and found the eleven gathered together "and those who were with them," and told them all what had happened, but again according to Mark's Gospel (Mk. 16.12-3), the others "did not believe them." By the time that the two disciples had returned from Emmaus, Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter, because they were told this when they arrived back in Jerusalem (Lk. 24.33-4). No actual description of this resurrection appearance to Peter is recorded, although the fact of it is mentioned by both Luke and Paul. And yet still the company of the disciples did not believe the report of the two from Emmaus (Mark 16:12).

And then as they were talking, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them, we are told. Only Thomas was missing. Yet according to Luke's version of this story (Lk. 24.36-43), the disciples were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw only a spirit or a ghost, that it wasn't really Jesus. So, Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is I myself;

handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And why they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, Jesus said to them, "Have you anything to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it before them as if to prove that he was not a ghost, for ghosts do not eat. It was Jesus himself, in all His Resurrected glory. And in Mark's Gospel, Jesus then upbraided the disciples for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

So, it shouldn't be surprising that when Thomas returned and the disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, that he didn't believe them; that he demanded proof that it wasn't just a ghost they saw; that he wanted to see the print of the nails in his hands and put his hand in his side to be sure. For the other disciples hadn't come to believe so easily themselves. None of them had believed the testimony of the women at the sepulcher, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, or Mary Magdalene, or even Peter, when they each had reported having seen Jesus. And even when they themselves did see Him there that very night, they thought at first that it was only a spirit, and they questioned in their hearts and disbelieved. Thomas was no different from the other disciples. He was no more a doubter than the others. For belief had not come easily to any of them.

A week later we are told that the disciples were again in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were again shut for fear of the Jewish authorities, but Jesus came and stood among them. And He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Then Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God." But Jesus reproved him, saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

As a skeptic myself, I frequently note that the various Gospel accounts disagree with one another in their stories of the Resurrection, time after time. There is a confusion in the retelling of this event, except that those early disciples experienced something very powerful and very unexpected that first Easter, like Shermer with his radio, it was "a spine tingling moment." We don't yet have the science to explain such spectacularly unlikely events, as Shermer noted about the radio. We don't have the science to explain what really happened. So Shermer concludes his book and I this sermon by saying: "Revel in the mystery and drink in the unknown. It is where science and wonder meet." AMEN.